

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS, JEWISH IDENTITY, AND NEEDS OF JEWISH GRADUATE STUDENTS IN THE PHILADELPHIA AREA

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The key to preserving and strengthening the Jewish identity of graduate students is to meet their Jewish needs as long as they can be reached. This needs assessment study of Jewish graduate students in the Philadelphia area clearly shows that they want Jewish programming. However, this programming should be packaged specifically for graduate students, be sophisticated, and be organized around their schedule and specific time constraints.

Hillel of Greater Philadelphia (formerly the Jewish Campus Activities Board, JCAB) is the local organization serving Jewish students in the Philadelphia area. It provides services to Jewish students in 18 colleges and universities through 7 campus offices. The administration and board of Hillel of Greater Philadelphia are greatly interested in improving services to better meet the changing needs and characteristics of students in the region. This quest for quality has involved the formation of a series of task forces to study, assess, and recommend ways to enrich the scope and quality of services to meet the expectations of all constituencies.

In the fall of 1990, Hillel of Greater Philadelphia established the Task Force on Service to Jewish Graduate Students in the Philadelphia Area. The membership included Hillel board members, community leaders, and students. Its purpose was to identify the needs of Jewish graduate students and to recommend to Hillel of Greater Philadelphia how these needs could best be met. The Task Force used four instruments to determine the needs and interests of Jewish students in the Philadelphia area: (1) interviews with professionals in area colleges and universities on concerns of graduate students in general and on Jewish needs in particular; (2) discussions with graduate students on such topics as university support services, religious identity and observance,

and the special needs of specific subgroups; (3) a survey questionnaire designed to learn more about the Jewish graduate student population at Philadelphia colleges and universities; and (4) an evaluation of services provided by Hillel of Greater Philadelphia to the Jewish students of the Philadelphia area. This article reports the findings from the survey. Data from other instruments used by the Task Force are also presented to substantiate and highlight the findings.

THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE AND JEWISH IDENTITY

Eighty to ninety percent of Jewish college-aged youth are enrolled in college (Dickter, 1992; Lavender, 1977). Thus, it is safe to assume that the college experience can have a significant impact on the future of the American Jewish community. Opinion, however, is divided as to whether this impact is positive or negative. Some view the college experience as an opportunity to develop a strong Jewish identity and attachment to the Jewish community, whereas others see it as a contributing factor to secularization and interfaith marriages (Greenberg, 1968). Dickter (1992, p. 20) has stated, "Students who become active in a Jewish club or organization are the minority. Most are unaffiliated and many pass through their college years without ever attending a Jewish activity."

For most students, college is not the place to develop a Jewish identity. Although Jewish professionals on campus usually assume the responsibility of providing a sense of identity and community to students, it is clear that they cannot reach students who had have no prior interest in Jewish affairs. Monson (1984), for example, found a relationship between a student's level of participation in religious life on campus and his or her past Judaic experiences. Clearly, these findings are general and do not include individual exceptions.

The findings of the recently published National Jewish Population Survey paint a gloomy picture of the future of the Jewish community in the United States (Kosmin et al., 1991). The most devastating and most discussed finding is that for the first time the number of Jews marrying spouses from other religions is greater than those marrying a Jewish spouse. This finding, as well as many others in the report, raises two issues of central importance to the future of the Jewish community: who will be the future leaders of the American Jewish community, and what type of Jewish identity will they bring with them?

The strong support by B'nai B'rith and many Jewish federations nationwide for Hillel is an indication that many in the Jewish community believe that Jewish students need to be supported in their efforts to develop a Jewish identity (B'nai B'rith Hillel Foundations, 1991). In a recent survey of Jewish students at one university, Raphael and Cnaan (1991) found that many students reported Jewish-related needs ranging from providing responses to anti-Semitism to opportunities to celebrate religious holidays in their dormitories. This study confirmed the need for an active Hillel on campus, greater outreach to students, and a greater range of services geared to specific subgroups of students.

Although little is known about the Jewish experience and the use of Hillel services by undergraduates, there are no data at all available concerning Jewish graduate stu-

dents. One reason for this lack of data is that most Hillels concentrate their services on undergraduate students, and graduate students are generally underserved because it is assumed that they are uninterested in Hillel's services or in consuming services in company with college students. Behind this assumption is a prevailing myth that graduate students are too busy with their studies and their own family life to be either involved in or served by a Hillel. Yet, it is these Jewish graduate students who will most likely be the future leaders of the Jewish community, as well as of the wider society, through their advanced education in such areas as law, medicine, social work, business, liberal arts, and the natural and exact sciences.

Over the last 30 years, an important developmental change has taken place in American society that has direct bearing on the college experience and Jewish identity; namely, the growing trend to prolong education and entry into adulthood. Today, those entering the professions are required to have more education and be better qualified than their counterparts 30 years ago. For example, a college degree, which was once sufficient for most business jobs, has given way to the MBA as the expected norm. Consequently, this generation is spending more years in school compared with previous generations, and they are entering the workplace in their late twenties or even early thirties, rather than in the early twenties as was once the norm. Furthermore, in the past 30 years, the average age of marriage for both men and women has increased from 20-25 to age 30 and older. More and more women over age 40 are bearing children. Thus, both men and women are not rushing to build a family at a young age, and many are waiting to have children until their late thirties and after they have established a career. The outcome of these societal changes is that today's graduate students, to a large extent, are at the same developmental stage as were undergraduate students at the time when

most Hillel Foundations and the Hillel's philosophy were established.

The years that Jewish students spend in college and graduate school must be viewed as an opportunity for the Jewish community to reach out to these young people at a time when they are most open to new ideas and willing to explore new ways of looking at the world and at themselves. However, the community's ability to reach out will be successful only if it knows who these young people are and what they need. Thus, this study is an all-important first step in investigating Jewish graduate students and their needs.

The purpose of the study was to determine the type of Jewish and social needs of Jewish graduate students; more specifically, their (1) demographic distribution; (2) participation in university nonacademic life; (3) choice of counselors; (4) Jewish identity; (5) participation in Jewish life on campus; (6) familiarity with Jewish graduate organizations; (7) participation in organized Jewish graduate student activities; and (8) interest in participating in Jewish graduate students activities in the future.

METHODS

Based on the study by Raphael and Cnaan (1991) with Jewish students at the University of Pennsylvania (Penn), members of the Task Force developed a four-page questionnaire consisting of 35 questions. The questions, mostly factual or attitudinal, concerned the life experiences of graduate students. Most questions were categorized (fixed-alternative), and a few were open-ended. The questionnaire was tested in a pilot study with six Jewish graduate students from Penn's law and social work schools to determine its clarity, relevance, and ease of completion. Based on the comments of these students, a final version of the questionnaire was prepared and printed.

One thousand questionnaires were printed and 700 were distributed by the Task Force in graduate student mail boxes on the greater Philadelphia campuses. Two

hundred and fifteen questionnaires were returned for a return rate of 30.7%, which was higher than the return rate in the Penn undergraduate study conducted a year earlier by Raphael and Cnaan (1991).

Respondents reported enrollments in eight different universities in the Philadelphia metropolitan area: Penn (58.5%), Drexel (14.0%), Temple (8.5%), Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (8.0%), PC College of Podiatric Medicine (5.5%), Jefferson Medical College (3.0%), Hahnemann University (1.5%), and Gratz College (1.0%). As more than half of the respondents were from Penn, this analysis includes a comparison of Penn and non-Penn graduate students.

This study has some limitations. Its sample may not be representative of the entire Jewish graduate student population because of selection bias. The questionnaires reached identified Jewish graduate students, and presumably only those who were interested in Jewish concerns responded. The extensive Jewish background of the respondents, as reported below, reflects this possible bias. However, the bias is minimized by the fact that the study sample comprises the most likely potential users of services for Jewish graduate students. Note that only two-fifths (41.7%) said they used Hillel as undergraduates.

STUDY FINDINGS

Most Jewish graduate students as expected were older than college students (85.9% were between 20 and 30 years old), yet most (72.2%) were single. Only 17.8% lived in university housing. Jewish graduate students were not concentrated in one discipline, but across all disciplines and professions. The most frequently reported fields were medicine (21.9%), law and business (18.9% each), and social work and pharmacy (7.5% each).

Unlike college students who generally choose bars and university locations as places for "hanging-out," graduate students showed a strong preference for

friends' apartments. Their first choice of leisure activities was meeting people (72.7%) followed by going to the theater (66.5%), museums (54.6%), participatory sports (52.6%), brunches (49.8%), and Jewish social and cultural activities (49.0%). The majority worked at a job in addition to studying. Yet, over 40% reported that they spend one-quarter to one-half of their time outside of class socializing with their friends, indicating that many graduate students do indeed have time to participate in extracurricular activities if so desired.

About half of the respondents categorized their Judaic affiliation as Conservative (46.8%) followed by Reform (28.9%), Reconstructionist (13.2%), "none of the above" (6.3%), and Orthodox (4.7%). Identification with Judaism was reported by 74.8% as cultural, by 45.2% as ethnic, and by 36.2% as Zionist; because some respondents checked more than one category, the sum exceeds 100%.

There was a clear indication of strong Jewish identity among those in the sample. Over three-quarters had been a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, almost 60% had visited Israel, and over 40% had attended Jewish camps. In addition, about nine out of ten students participated in a Pesach seder, attended High Holiday services, and lit Chanukah candles. Almost two-thirds of the respondents claimed that over half of their friends were Jewish.

The Jewish activities that most interested students were concerts or plays, films, and social events. Women consistently were more interested than men in extracurricular activities. Anti-Semitism was ranked as the Jewish topic of greatest concern by almost 90% of the respondents. The next highest-rated topic, Israeli-Palestinian relationships, was rated important by less than 80%. In addition, about three-fourths of the students rated maintaining Jewish identity as extremely important. These findings suggest that these three topics should be used as a vehicle to attract larger number of Jewish students.

Over half (51.8%) of the respondents were familiar with Jewish graduate programs, and about a third reported participation in a graduate Jewish activity. Of the latter, almost all said that they would attend a similar program again. Not surprisingly, there was a significant association between attendance and familiarity with the programs. The more the students were familiar with Jewish graduate activities, the more they were likely to attend. In addition, single students were more likely to attend these programs than married students.

Most respondents said the most effective way to reach them was through personal contact and not by public media. Most were attracted to programs that they found enjoyable, had interesting topics, and were attended by their friends. Barriers to attendance were poor scheduling, such as too close to exam time, high cost, and the lack of participation by their friends. About two-thirds of the respondents said they would be interested in participating in Jewish graduate activities in the future, a clear indication of demand for such programs. They indicated that such programs should be very sophisticated, cover a variety of topics, attract interesting people, and exclude undergraduates as much as possible.

Clearly, Jewish graduate students have unique and urgent Jewish needs that are not met by most existing programs. Furthermore, it is evident that these needs should be met in a framework that is exclusively designed and packaged for graduate students and organized around their schedule and their specific needs.

IMPLEMENTATION

The Task Force, which completed its work in early 1991, then presented its final report and recommended program to the board of Hillel of Greater Philadelphia. The board approved the findings and the suggested program pending additional funding. This action was taken to ensure that any services provided for graduate students would not be at the expense of the services provided to

undergraduates. Despite a substantial cut in the fiscal year 1991/92 federation allocation to Hillel of Greater Philadelphia, additional federation funding was provided to implement the recommended program for graduate students. The local Jewish federation therefore recognized that graduate students are an important segment of the Jewish community that to date has been underserved and neglected. The funding was secured only in the middle of the summer, yet by September 1991 the Graduate Student Project (GSP) was launched.

In keeping with the philosophy of GSP, which came directly from the Task Force report—that graduate students would run all activities and the staff should serve as assistants and mediators—a director of GSP was hired whose role was to organize, manage, and provide leadership for a collaborative effort that would encourage Hillel professionals and graduate students to work together. An office for the director was set up at the Hillel of Greater Philadelphia regional building on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania. In addition, a telephone “warm line” was established to publicize coming events and to link graduate students and interested professionals.

By January 1992, GSP had a list of 600 Jewish graduate students who were interested in being informed of Hillel activities through telephone calls or newsletters. This was an increase of over 200% in the number of graduate students in all graduate programs in the previous year. By 1993 the GSP list included 800 students as well as contact leaders in each university. Because the list is computerized, lists of graduate students can be generated by university, by academic disciplines, and by social interests. The *GSP Newsletter* has grown from a one-page information sheet on GSP activities to a newsletter that includes all types of relevant local activities and short articles of common interest.

GSP serves also as the umbrella organization for a number of graduate student groups organized by campus, academic dis-

cipline, or other joint interests. As such, it offers special programs, as well as city-wide programs. For example, GSP helped Temple University's Law Group and the Wharton School's core group to organize, recruit members, and carry out programs. In addition, in its first year GSP carried out its own programs, such as monthly lectures, biweekly happy hours (20-30 attending on the average), and Kabbalat Shabbat dinners (50-60 attending on the average). The high point of the first semester of GSP operation was the city-wide Chanukah party attended by over 200 graduate students.

GSP is a success story of a new service meeting previously unrecognized needs. As the director of GSP candidly admitted to the board of Hillel of Greater Philadelphia on January 22, 1992, her every effort immediately turned into a successful program not solely because of her talent and abilities but because there were professionals and graduate students eager to assist and many students eager to consume the services.

Financial support for GSP is now secured, and the program is considered an ongoing part of Hillel activities. In addition to the newsletter sent to 800 registered students and many more through school-based mail boxes, GSP is reaching students through a weekly radio program on the University of Pennsylvania radio station, a popular radio station among students.

Throughout the academic year of 1992/93, between 100 to 300 graduate students gathered every third week for a Shabbat dinner and some social/cultural program at the Penn Hillel building. Students who participated in these programs praise them for fostering an atmosphere of welcoming newcomers and for enabling graduate students to manifest their Jewishness in a safe environment. Many more attended High Holiday services and special graduate students parties held off-campus. In fact, students requested more social events off-campus, and programs are now being planned to accommodate this request.

In many schools and campuses local

graduate student groups were organized, which sponsored biweekly programs for their members, such as Sunday brunches, going together to sport events, post-exam parties, and Jewish-related discussions. Thus, GSP continues to serve as a catalyst and as an umbrella organization, with most of the initiative and organizational work being carried out by students. One key to GSP's continued success is its active identification and cultivation of new leaders from the cohort entering graduate programs.

In sum, after 2 years of operation, GSP is attracting many Jewish graduate students, and it seems to have the potential to grow more in numbers and activities. There is a thirst for more services than can be possibly made available.

CONCLUSIONS

The future of the Jewish community begins in every Jewish home and continues at every level of Jewish communal and educational programs. For most people, the capstone for this process is their graduate education. Although it is unrealistic to assume that Hillels nationwide can undo years of educational neglect, they are the last hope of the Jewish community in involving those who will be its most successful and influential leaders. The key to preserving the Jewish identity and commitment of this elite group is to fulfill their Jewish needs as long as they can be reached.

The needs assessment study indicates that graduate students do want Jewish programming and that this programming should be packaged specifically for them and organized according to their unique constraints and stage in life. It is interesting that among those who answered the needs assessment survey, only 41.7% said they used Hillel services as undergraduates. Therefore, three-fifths of the sample were

missed by Hillel professionals as undergraduates, yet were still interested in using Jewish graduate programs.

Although the study findings and program implementation are based on only one locale, they are of significant merit to warrant replication, if not generalization. More Hillels should study the needs of their Jewish graduate students in order to plan more effective programs for them. Graduate students must not be viewed by Hillel professionals as an added burden, but rather as a vital constituency. Consequently, Hillels should direct more personnel and services toward this group.

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